INSIDE ISSUES . . . .

Issues for RHODE ISLAND MANAGEMENT

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CUSTOMIZED JOB ROTATION

People problems? A change of scenery can do wonders

Job rotation — the practice of moving employees to new assignments to introduce them to the organization, to temporarily fill a critical vacancy, or to test their abilities — is not a new management mechanism. But today's managers are applying it with a novel twist that challenges such sacrosanct traditions as job permanency and job specialization.

They see new possibilities in the unscheduled rotation of employees to meet unique business and personnel needs. In this framework, supervisors are ready to move employees into new work situations where their talents can be more profitably used. Business leaders who use job rotation, including the chief executive officers of IBM, Citicorp, People Express and others, agree that their managers do not hesitate to move people across departmental lines to whatever job needs their skills. True, it's a lot easier to let people specialize. But that doesn't fully use their talents, and soon they get unhappy — and less productive.

How to Use Job Rotation

* Job rotation must be customized
  Supervisors must identify specific needs and specific employees who can satisfy those needs. Each job rotation assignment has to be tailored to department or agency goals, but it must also fit the employee's experience, abilities, and prospects. Special training may be necessary to ensure a promising mesh. A standardized rotation program aimed at *all* employees makes little sense.
* The goals/objectives of every rotation assignment must be clear-cut. Each rotated employee must know precisely what the job entails, and what is expected of him or her. Job rotation should be accepted willingly, even enthusiastically; it rarely succeeds when arbitrarily imposed.
* The new environment must be supportive.
  When the rotation cuts across departments and agencies, the new supervisors and colleagues must be receptive. If they are not willing to help, give information and offer support as needed, the rotation plan is bound to flounder. The goal of job rotation is not individual promotion but team improvement.

While this article suggests the "in-house" use of job rotation, there is yet another facet of job rotation that is much broader — that of the interchange of government employees between state agencies, the various levels of local government, other state and out-of-state localities; and finally, between the federal government.

While private employers may view job rotation as a management technique of recent vintage, a much expanded form of job rotation has been in use in Rhode Island state government for decades.

Rhode Island has a long history of intergovernmental cooperation with local cities and towns. As far back as 1925, for example, the Rhode Island State Police had the authority to assign personnel to local cities and towns at the request of city or town councils. The State Police may also assign personnel to the Department of Environmental Management at the request of the department director.

Recognizing the value of these early examples of interagency cooperation, and wishing to expand upon them, the General Assembly in 1965, declared that "The state of Rhode Island recognizes that intergovernmental cooperation is an essential factor in resolving problems affecting this state and that the interchange of personnel between and among governmental agencies at the same or different levels of government is a significant factor in achieving such cooperation."

The General Assembly then proceeded to enact legislation that allows, "Any department, agency or instrumentality of the state or any city or town or any school, college or university operated by the state ... to participate in a program of interchange of employees with departments, agencies or instrumentalities of the federal government, another state or locality, or other agencies, municipalities, or instrumentalities of this state ..."

Does job rotation work in state government?

At the present time, four state employees from four different departments (DOT, DCF, DOH, and DHS), are on special assignment with the Office of Personnel Administration under the Employee Interchange Program. The four were assigned to assist the OPA with the accelerated job examination program, and to perform personnel administration-related duties resulting from the state's new civil service reform initiative. All four participants in the program are enthusiastic about what they view as a "golden opportunity" for them to expand their knowledge and experience.

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DISCRETIONARY EFFORT IN THE WORKPLACE — PART V

Conclusion of a series on the changing status of the American work ethic.

Synopsis of PART IV (ISSUES - October 1986). In part IV the conventional view of a deteriorating work ethic was debunked, and rebuttal was offered to support the contention that the American work ethic is strong and healthy and may even be growing stronger, and that the real cause of the commitment gap lies elsewhere.

The real cause of the commitment gap lies not with the new cultural values or with an erosion of the work ethic, but with a striking failure of managers to support and reinforce the work ethic. This means that practical solutions are possible.

If many Americans have an inner need to give their best to their jobs, and if increasingly they have a great deal of control over their level of effort on the job, what is preventing them from giving more to their work? Why do they hold back? And what steps can be taken to encourage them to give more?

The findings of this study suggest that the problem, in its simplest terms, arises from the fact that managerial skill and training have not kept pace with the changes that have affected the workplace. The trend towards greater discretion on the job is outrunning present managerial practices. The hypothesis offered by this study is that incentive and managerial systems are out of sync with changing values and attitudes. As a result, the actions of managers blunt rather than stimulate and reinforce the work ethic. In a low-discretion workplace, such actions may not have been overly harmful, but in a high-discretion workplace they can be fatal to effort and quality.

This conclusion suggests that practical solutions are possible. Institutional practices and policies are often actionable in ways that cultural trends are not. This is not to suggest that there are quick fixes or easy solutions. But pinpointing the cause of the debate focuses our attention on the steps that can be taken to harness the strength of America's work ethic.

The primary focus here is on steps that can be taken by managers to correct these mistaken practices. There is no intent to imply that managers are the only ones who can take steps to reinforce the work ethic. The ultimate decision to give or withhold effort must be made by jobholders themselves, and a variety of leaders in government, education, and labor also need to reinforce work ethic values. But managers are in a particularly favorable position — they hold the "action levers" that have a significant effect on how much commitment people will invest in their jobs, or, to put it another way, how much discretionary effort people will invest in their work. This study isolates four main areas where managers can take steps to reinforce the work ethic.

Reduce Disincentives. Many jobholders receive a message from their managers that runs exactly counter to work ethic norms. Although a majority of jobholders want to do good work for its own sake, they feel that the workplace does not reward people who put in an extra effort. Nearly three-quarters of the work force (73%) say that the quality and amount of effort that they put into their job has very little to do with how much they are paid. This is an astonishing finding. Nearly three-quarters also believe that the absence of such a close relation between pay and job performance is one of the main reasons why work effort has deteriorated. In addition, many jobholders feel little connection between the productivity of their firms and their own welfare. A study conducted for the Chamber of Commerce in 1980 found that only 9% of the American work force believe that they themselves will be the primary beneficiaries of improvements in productivity.

To a discerning degree the existing incentive systems have uncoupled the traditional link between financial rewards and effectiveness on the job. Rather than rewarding behavior that exemplifies the work ethic, the implicit message from management is that commitment and dedication are neither necessary nor desirable. The lesson for managers is clear: managers who want to reinforce the work ethic norms need to find some way to recognize effective behavior.

Distinguish between factors that enhance job effectiveness and those that increase job statisfaction. Even when managers attempt to reform and restructure the workplace, they may be focusing on factors that are only peripherally related to motivation and enhanced productivity or product quality. Specifically, managers often fail to distinguish between factors that make jobs more agreeable and factors that make people want to work harder and more effectively.

A number of studies have shown that job satisfaction is not directly related to job productivity. Indeed, many of the factors that make jobs more agreeable (such as having congenial co-workers) may even have the effect of diminishing effectiveness.

This study found that working Americans make a sharp distinction between factors that make their jobs more agreeable and those that would improve their motivation to work harder. When jobholders identify characteristics that would make their jobs more satisfying, they choose features such as lack of stress, convenient location, good fringe benefits, a clean and pollution-free work environment, and good relationships with co-workers and supervisors. But when asked to indentify factors that would make them work more effectively, they mention characteristics such as "a good chance for advancement," "a challenging job," or "a good chance to develop my abilities." Consistent with our finding of a strong work ethic, many of the things that people say they want more of on their present job are *motivators* rather than *satisfiers*. It is believed that some recent attempts to reform the workplace have been flawed by a failure to take this distinction into account. Enhancing job satisfaction is, of course, a laudable goal in its own right. But in difficult economic times, managers and union leaders have seen that increasing productivity is equally or even more important. The findings of this study suggest that improvements in productivity require a stronger emphasis on job effectiveness in contrast to job satisfaction.

Enforce High Standards of Quality. Nothing corrodes the work ethic more than the perception that employers and managers are indifferent to quality. Conversely, a strict, even harsh emphasis on the highest standards of quality reinforces the conviction that work has an intrinsic worth and meaning. Setting high standards of quality requires that a firm be ready to make sacrifices to prove that it really does want quality. Managers who have been successful in using higher quality standards to produce greater commitment frequently report that jobholders initially tend to be cynical and suspicious of such efforts. Many employees reject the added pressure until they are convinced that the company, too, is willing to assume the extra hardships that higher quality can demand.

Flatten the Hierarchy. The most radical and difficult set of recommendations deals with status, authority, fairness, and perogatives in the workplace. Traditional organizations embody a centralized control system, with clearly specified job descriptions, hierarchical systems of authority, and sharp status and pay differences between those who manage and those who do the work. Such differences reflect the assumption that individual jobholders are less central to the success of the enterprise than are managers.

The question is: Can this sort of traditional organization call forth the feelings of loyalty and identification with the goals of the enterprise that are necessary in the new context of the American workplace? This report suggests that it can not. In a high-discretion workplace, symbols of status and privilege that are not distributed in accordance with performance are seen as "unfair" and are likely to undercut the work ethic and high levels of performance. Commitment is compatible with authority. But it is not compatible with authority that takes advantage of its privileges at the expense of its followers. Many organizations that have been successful at winning high levels of commitment are characterized by relatively flat organization charts and by status differences that are not invidious: They do not shout the message, "Managers are a class apart." Unfortunately, all approaches to this tough issue of power and authority have disadvantages as well as advantages. And even where the prospects are encouraging, they can encounter tremendous resistance — particularly from middle managers. Sidney Harman, president of Harman International, has been a poineer in the effort to restructure the workplace to enhance rather than undermine commitment. He describes some of the difficulties in this way:

> One of the most critical factors in any attempt to restructure the workplace is the role of the middle manager or the floor supervisor. Typically such a person has risen from the ranks after 15 or 20 years of playing a subordinate role. To ask the newly liberated manager to yield that conventional power without addressing the consequences is a guarantee of failure.

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DO'S AND DON'TS for stimulating worker commitment and quality performance.

DO tie remuneration directly to performance that enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of the enterprise.

DO give public and tangible recognition to people who keep standards of quality and effort that exceed average statisfactory job performance.

DO accept wholeheartedly the principle that employees should share directly and significantly in overall productivity gains (however defined).

Do encourage jobholders to participate with management in defining recognizable goals and standards against which individual performance can be judged.

DO give special attention to the difficulties that middle managers face in supporting and enforcing programs to restructure the workplace.

DO NOT permit situations to develop where the interests of employees run counter to the well being of the firm — e.g., by introducing new technology in a way that threatens employee's job security or overtime.

DO NOT attempt to improve standards of quality unless you are prepared to accept its full costs — e.g., discarding substandard products, paying more for better components, or transferring or dismissing people who can not do quality work.

DO NOT permit a significant gap to develop between management rhetoric and the actual reward system — nothing feeds employee cynicism as much as management blindness or insincerity about the forms of behavior that really "pay off."

DO NOT pretend that programs designed to increase productivity are really intended to enhance job satisfaction and the dignity of work.

DO NOT support special privileges for managers that serve to enhance the status of managers by widening the gap between them and those who do the work — e.g., giving bonuses to managers at the same time that employees are being laid off.

CUSTOMIZED JOB ROTATION

(con't from page 1)

Debra Jodoin from DOT on assignment to the Personnel Administrator's Office, spoke of the Employee Interchange Program as, "the best thing that has happened to me during my civil service career."

Prior to assuming her duties under the program, Debra, although proficient in personnel matters, knew little about computers. After on-the-job training and experience coupled with courses offered by a computer manufacturer, she is now qualified on two computer systems. Although she views the opportunity to learn new skills as important, she values the chance to broaden her knowledge in personnel administration, as the greater of the two.

Debra has made important contributions to the Personnel Consolidation and Centralization Plan and other civil service reforms, and has compiled and published the long overdue revised Rules and Regulations to the State Classified and Unclassified System.

Thus, the Employee Interchange Program has proven to be a symbiotic arrangement. The agency has benefitted fron her knowledge and skills in personnel administration, and she in turn has acquired additional marketable skills — a proficiency with computers — that can be expected to serve her well in the future as she progresses in her civil service career.

Marie McGlynn, an Employee Relations Officer at the Department of Human Services' is also enthusiastic about the Employee Interchange Program. Assigned to the Personnel Administrator's Office, Marie looks upon the program as "a unique opportunity not only to broaden my knowledge of personnel administration, but also to view the problems and challenges of personnel work from a different perspective."

Marie's contributions to the agency are equally impressive. As a member of the Special Task Force to Study Administrative Services, she participated in the study and co-authored the final report that serves as a basic document for the implementation of numerous personnel administration reforms.

Her contributions to the personnel consolidation and centralization plan have been substantial; and her current involvement in the health care continuation program for state employees (COBRA), and other changes affecting employer-provided benefits, serves as a showcase for her administrative abilities.

Linda Gemma, on assignment from DCF, and Mariann Antonucci from DOH, are assigned to the Examination Section of the Office of Personnel Administration. Both sing the praises of the Employee Interchange Program with such superlatives as "super" and "great."

Their assistance in breaking-up the log-jam of backed up work related to the examination process has been invaluable. Without their able assistance, the civil service reform initiatives would have been in severe jeopardy.

DISCRETIONARY EFFORT IN THE WORKPLACE — PART V

(cont'd from page 2)

Unless provision is made for expansion of the responsibilities of the middle manager, he or she will surely find ways to subvert the program — indeed, the middle manager is positioned ideally to do just that.

This series is based on a report "Putting the Work Ethic to Work — a Public Agenda Report on Restoring America's Competitive Vitality," by Daniel Yankelovich and John Immerwahr, The Public Agenda Foundation, Washington, D.C.

ISSUES

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EEO AFFIRMATIVELY SPEAKING . . .

Most supervisors strive to be fair when appraising and evaluating the work performance of subordinates. Employees on the other hand, will challenge what they perceive as unfair appraisals of their work performance, and can seek redress through a variety of channels open to them under federal and state laws.

When a performance appraisal is challenged, those reviewing the appraisal look first to the degree of fairness exercised by the supervisor who made the evaluation.

Here are some tips on conducting employee performance evaluations that can help managers reduce the chances of an appraisal challenge.

Know the employee and the job. The longer a person serves as a supervisor, the greater the danger of that person becoming distant from the people supervised, and umfamiliar with the job they do. A supervisor needs to remain on top of employee performance; *know* the job they do; and *know* the requirements of their job descriptions. If a performance appraisal is challenged, and it is shown during the inquiry that the supervisor was unfamiliar with the employee or the work performed, otherwise sound decisions can be seriously compromised.

Advance preparation required. Notify employees five to ten days in advance of the performance evaluation interview, and give the reason for it. Present appraisal information in a positive way. Stress that the performance appraisal process is an *opportunity* for both employee and supervisor to become better acquainted; to identify new direction; to help maximize individual strengths, and to uncover weaknesses that can be remedied to mutual advantage. Encourage employees to prepare questions to ask during the interview. If the employee is performing additional duties not specifically outlined in a job description, suggest that the employee write them down and prepare to discuss them. This will help assure employee credit and recognition for the extra work performed.

Ask for employee opinions. The appraisal interview gives you, the supervisor, the opportunity to offer support rather than simply passing judgement. You can approve of justifiable self-praise, correct distorted conceptions, and encourage employees to explore with you, ways to strengthen weak performance areas by setting some specific goals.

Be specific with oral appraisals. Be prepared to give specific examples of the performance areas which reflect employee strengths and weaknesses. Confine your remarks to the worker's *job*, and not personality traits, attitudes, or character. An effective way to describe an employee's weak area, is to cite examples of how *present* performance can be improved. Additionally, it is helpful to explain the consequences of a workers' weak performance. For example, if an employee is habitually late in completing assignments, explain the impact that this poor performance has on other workers, and ultimately, on the organizational unit. This helps employees understand the consequences of their work and the importance of their role in the organization.

Don't generalize on performance. Employees may excel in one part of their work, but this is no assurance thay they excel in *all* areas of their job. Generalizations on performance based solely in one area of strength, sometimes called the "halo effect," are often inaccurate. Conversely, failure in one area of job performance is no indication that the individual is a marginal or poor performer.

Avoid going down the middle. Giving every worker a "satisfactory" rating does more than take away from outstanding performers. It can also make it very difficult to fire an incompetent subordinate. Aggrieved employees can use such an evaluation in, say, a "wrongful discharge" action, as proof that they were no better or worse than other employees.

Be fair - not "nice." Giving average performers excellent or outstanding ratings in an effort to be kind, may make it difficult to counsel employees who are weak, or to reward those who excel.

Wrapping-up the interview. At the conclusion of the performance evaluation interview, go over the points discussed by both parties. Resolve differences by talking about the *reasons*, and why change is necessary. Make certain you understand employee points of view, and that employees in turn, clearly understand what is expected of them in the future.

Justify the evaluation to yourself. Review the evaluation for accuracy, specificity and objectivity. Re-read standards, and make sure that the evaluation is totally job related, realistic and in accord with the employees' job description.

Be prepared to defend written ratings with supporting data. This is particularly important if the rating is exceptionally high or low. All facts, figures, dates, specific examples, and other information used to arrive at the rating should be included with the written appraisal. This additional information will strengthen the evaluation. Equally important, this supporting data will serve you better in the future than your memory, should you need to defend your appraisal.

COMMUNICATIONS: An Essential Tool of Management

Part IV in a series for public service managers on effectively communicating with employees.

Synopsis of Part III (ISSUES, October 1986). In Part III, choosing a communicator was discussed; the duties of a communicator were outlined; and the role of managers and supervisors was explained.

Role of Employees —

Many agencies think of their employees only as passive recipients of information. But employees have many *active* communications roles, as well. For example:

- *Communicating with one another.* More than the communicator, the supervisor, or any other person, it is the individual employee who determines the attitudes and motivation of his coworkers. One rotten apple can *spoil* the barrel — by misleading new employees, starting unfounded rumors, belittling management, and a variety of other means.
- *Communicating with management.* Top officers often rely more than they realize on employees to provide essential information about day-to-day proceedings. If employees do not willingly supply these facts, management's decision-making abilities can be severely handicapped.
- *Communicating with outsiders.* As members of the community, employees can have a greater effect on public opinion of your agency than a whole team of public relations experts. Their words and attitudes are what shape your agency's image in the public eye.

These are just a few of the reasons why it's vitally important that you establish a good, two-way communications system — one that sells your agency as a good place to work to employees, and encourages their participation in helping to make your operations a success.

Where unions come in —

It may be necessary to deal with union officials, rather than employees directly, in planning and communicating changes in work procedures or schedules, conduct rules, benefits programs and the like, and in resolving employee grievances and complaints.

Why communications efforts sometimes fail —

Even the best-planned communications system can occasionally fall prey to various types of misuse that will prevent your messages from getting through. Management must be constantly on the alert for such hazards as:

- *Poor timing.* Unless employees receive a constant, steady flow of information at all times, they will strongly suspect communications efforts that "happen" to be made just before a major agency event, such as an unfavorable news report, an agency reorganization, a reduction in force, or on any other such occasion.
- *Insincerity.* Most little white lies will sooner or later be discovered — and can irreparably damage employees' confidence in agency information sources. Equally damaging are announcements intended to scare employees (e.g., stricter penalties for rule infractions) or to mollify them (e.g., planned improvements in working conditions) if they're not followed up by action.
- *Purposeful blocking.* Almost all organizations have some managers and supervisors who equate information with personal power, and attempt to keep it to themselves. Blocking can occur in *upward* communications, too, if supervisors or employees fear reprisals for making frank comments.

Training in communications responsibilities is only part of the answer here; management must also eliminate, through positive action and example, the underlying causes of subordinates' insecurity.

- *Oversaturation.* It is possible, in some cases, to keep employees, *too* well informed. Ceaseless harangues to cut costs, boost efficiency, work safely, stay healthy, or anything else will eventually fall on deaf ears as employees automatically tune them out. A better way: schedule special short-term information campaigns on each subject — for example, cost-cutting in January, absenteeism in February, benefits in March, and so on.
- *Language barriers.* Communications must be couched in terms that the average employee understands and can relate to. This, of course, means easy-to-understand vocabulary. But that's not all: wording must appeal to employees *emotionally*, as well, if they are to accept the message. Consider, for instance, the difference in tone and implication between such words as "obedience" and "cooperation"; "worker" and "associate"; "required" and "requested."
- *Lack of management response.* Methods for encouraging upward communications will almost invariably fail if management does not respond promptly and thoughtfully to employees' upward messages. See that employees receive feedback quickly on whatever ideas, complaints or other information they pass along.

Next time in ISSUES, Part V of Communications - preparing the new employee for his/her job; communicating policies and rules; publicizing employee benefits; and correcting misinformation and dispelling rumors.